

10 Issues on Labor's Future (May 16, 2005)

## **Will More Money and Mega-Unions Solve Problems of Past Organizing Failures?**

**By Harry Kelber**

*(First in a series of ten articles)*

Everyone seems to agree that unless the AFL-CIO can reverse its declining percentage of the nation's work force and show some significant growth in membership and economic power, it will lose whatever relevance it has for America's working families. Some put labor's crisis in blunter terms: "Organize or die!"

In the past nine years, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney's "New Voices" team has tried numerous organizing strategies, but none have succeeded in halting labor's continuing decline.

When Sweeney became head of the federation, labor represented 14.5% of the nation's work force; today, the figure is down to 12.5%, and it's much worse in the private sector where fewer than one in twelve workers belong to a union.

So what do our national labor leaders propose to do differently about union organizing that has at least some chance of success? Most of the debate thus far has been about money — how much from the AFL-CIO's annual income will be spent on organizing and who gets what.

The group headed by Andrew Stern, president of the Service Employees, and James Hoffa, president of the Teamsters, want a 50% rebate of the per capita payments international unions pay the federation, amounting to \$45 million annually. They say they'll press for at least that amount at the July convention.

Sweeney has countered with a proposal to create a \$22.5 million Strategic Defense Fund, of which \$15 million could be used for rebates to internationals that meet high organizing standards. He has urged all affiliates to budget 30% of their income for organizing, which, if achieved, would create a pool of \$500 million to spend on recruiting new members.

Why do Sweeney and Stern cling to the illusion that if they can spend enough money on organizing, unions are bound to grow and become stronger? In the past decade, unions have spent countless millions of dollars in organizing campaigns that were either aborted or ended in failure. Given the additional money, it's not at all clear what labor leaders plan to do differently to recruit the millions of workers who say they'd like to join a union.

Stern proposes to consolidate the AFL-CIO's 57 affiliates into 15 or 20 "mega-unions," each responsible for a particular sector of the American economy. Assuming the unlikely possibility that his plan would be adopted, it still leaves unanswered two basic questions: (1) who will do the organizing and (2) how will it be done?

If the unions are to expand the number and size of their organizing campaigns, they'll need better-trained lead organizers and lots more of them. The Organizing Institute offers a basic three-day training program, whose "graduates," even with

some field training, are no match for the sophisticated “management consultants,” who brag they can defeat union organizing campaigns 90% of the time.

The O.I. must be upgraded and expanded with a corps of outstanding organizers working with labor educators to create and administer an advanced training program for hundreds of young unionists at four regional sites. Enough qualified labor activists can be found to take on this important assignment.

If we’re talking about recruiting millions of unorganized workers, like the CIO did in the 1930’s, the AFL-CIO should send out an appeal to its 13,000,000 members to become involved in a nationwide campaign to “Save Our Unions.” They must be made to understand that if the labor movement keeps on declining, they stand to lose whatever job protection, wages and benefits they now have; their union contracts will be more difficult to renegotiate and be worth less and less.

Every local union in the country must make organizing its top priority. It must send teams of its members to talk to unorganized workers at their workplace and in the communities where they live. They should distribute leaflets and other materials that make a convincing case for joining a union.

Central labor councils would have a special role in the national organizing campaign. Each of them would set up a “union recruiting center,” where unorganized workers could come and learn more about unions and have their questions answered by experienced labor activists.

The recruiting centers should be stocked with a variety of leaflets addressed to specific constituencies, as well as sample union contracts, constitutions and by-laws. Stacks of “union authorization cards,” supplied by various unions, should be available at the center for workers who are ready to join. A computerized data base should be kept of all contacts.

Each CLC should periodically invite people in the community to an “open house,” where the reasons for the union organizing campaign can be explained. CLC leaders could put anti-union managers on the defensive by challenging them to a public debate before a community audience.

The AFL-CIO’s *Voice at Work* must cease its constant repetition, in its literature and at rallies, of the many ways that employers use to intimidate and discourage workers from joining a union. That kind of message is counterproductive. We should be emphasizing labor’s positive role, and every victory should be publicized.

Unions must let it be known that they will use every means at their disposal to force the reinstatement of any worker fired for union activity. If firings occur, they should treat every case as a cause célèbre, using radio and TV spots, as well as rallies and picket lines, to inform the community of the company’s unjustified behavior. There are other “in your face” actions the unions can take to force the company to reinstate discharged workers.

If a union wins the reinstatement battle, it would give a huge boost to its organizing campaigns. At the very least, company managers would think twice before they resorted to firings to intimidate pro-union workers.

To achieve dramatic victories in recruiting new members, the AFL-CIO needs to mobilize union members with the same energy and resources it employed in the

2004 presidential elections. The nationwide organizing campaign would strengthen labor unity and solidarity, because every union would have a stake in making the campaign a success; by working together, they would all benefit.

Leaders are important, but they need an army of volunteers who understand that what's at stake is the survival of the union and their own economic future. That should prove to be a winning combination.

**Article 2: Labor's role in Politics. (To be posted Monday, May 23.)**